DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 303 900 EA 020 724

AUTHOR Frankel, Steven
TITLE Systems-Oriented Evaluation: A Better Approach to Improving the Achievement of Minority Students.
PUB DATE Apr 88
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 5-9, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Educational Assessment; *Educationally Disadvantaged; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; *Evaluation Methods; High Risk Students; Measurement Techniques; *Minority Groups; *Performance Factors; Potential Dropouts; Problem Solving; Systems Approach
IDENTIFIERS *Montgomery County Public Schools MD

ABSTRACT

This report favors a systems-oriented evaluation for improving minority student achievement, an inclusive approach, which may require funds to be (at least temporarily) withdrawn from other research activities. When financial resources are limited, such an evaluation may focus on a relatively limited range of related evaluation issues. In Montgomery County Public Schools, the systems approach to evaluation has developed new methods of setting performance goals, investigated math enrollment environmental influences, examined the effectiveness of magnet programs, tracked dropout student attitudes in a 2-year dropout prevention study, worked to reduce the disparity between majority and minority suspension rates, field tested a microcomputer-based management information system designed to reduce disciplinary incidents in school, identified previous behavioral incidents for at-risk students, and investigated the effect of school climate on minority student suspension rates. Assuming school districts have limited funds for such studies, the strength of the systems-oriented evaluation is that findings create variables for another evaluation, providing further insights into problems that effect minority achievement. (JAM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED303900

SYSTEMS-ORIENTED EVALUATION: A BETTER APPROACH TO IMPROVING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF MINORITY STUDENTS

Steven Frankel
Montgomery County (MD) Public Schools
Presented at April 1988 AERA Meeting in New Orleans

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

D. Hymes

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Most educational researchers approach evaluations much as the blind men did the elephant: with a determined effort to learn as much as possible about a small part of the problem.

While this approach is appropriate when problems can be defined rather tightly (e.g., "Do students score higher on year-end tests when Approach A is used, or when Approach B is used?"), it's been much less successful when applied to the much more encompassing problems which school systems face in the real world such as "What must we do to substantially increase the achievement of minority students?"

For, when questions like these are raised with teachers and principals, it becomes very apparent that -- much more than evaluators -- they view schools as a self-contained system in which improvements on outcome measures like achievement tests can only be obtained after improvements have been made on a wide variety of factors which at first glance are not directly related to achievement.

We can't teach the kids the skills they need to score high on achievement tests unless they're:

- *enrolling in demanding, academically-oriented classes;*
- *coming to class regularly; and*
- *completing the assigned work.*

And, these kinds of factors are affected by a multiplicity of other factors which underlie them. For instance, students CAN'T enroll in the more demanding secondary level courses unless they've mastered the prerequisite skills while in elementary school; and they WON'T enroll in those courses unless they feel that they'll be made welcome by the teachers and other students.

EA 020 224

Also, they can't come to class regularly if they're constantly being suspended; and they' won't do the work if they're perceived as troublemakers, or "tokens," rather than as serious students."

That's why, I'd rather see the school district invest in more teachers and books than in educational evaluations. We don't need you guys to give us answers to the easy questions, such as which approach to teaching writing works better. Hell, we can judge that ourselves. Don't come around until you're willing to help us with our real problems, and until you're willing to conduct your studies in real-life situations in which everything's mixed together!

When researchers engage in this kind of dialog with teachers and principals, the researchers' first reaction is to dismiss these arguments as being either excuses for killing what are to the researchers' interesting studies, or being impractical due to the cost and confounding conditions found in multifaceted studies. But when researchers' get by these initial feelings, they often admit, at least to themselves, that the practicioners are right.

After all, it's often the same kids:

- Who've been suspended several times,
- Who're enrolled in less challenging classes or in the "soft areas" of special education,
- Who don't come to school regularly, and
- Who -- to no ones' surprise -- drag down the group averages on the standardized achievement test results.

And, since problems in any of these areas ARE likely to affect achievement, unless researchers do look at how ALL may be prevented, the results will probably be less than satisfying.

This argument doesn't only apply to the lowest achieving students. A similar set of factors affect the achievement and aspirations of bright minority students. For, for them to succeed in greater numbers, they must be:

- Counselled in elementary school on the importance of enrolling in the junior high "gatekeeper" courses which often determine, in as early as the 7th or 8th grade, whether they will be able to enroll in calculus, French 4, or AP Chemistry, 5 or 6 years later.
- "Identified" for challenging courses and gifted & talented programs.
- Challenged and made welcome by the teachers of these courses and programs, whose attitudes must convey the message, "I know you can do it."

- Be supported, once in the courses, especially if they're one of the few minority students in the class and if their parents, siblings and friends can't help them with their assignments.

As this point, you're probably saying to yourself:

> *Sure, I'd like to be able to look at all these issues simultaneously. But we can't afford it! Therefore, I guess we'll have to continue to do 1 or 2 studies in this area each year and hope that over the long haul we'll be able to fit everything together."*

After operating in a piecemeal like most others for our first 7 years, the Department of Educational Accountability (DEA) of the Montgomery County (Maryland) Public Schools decided to take a more inclusive approach to the problem of increasing the achievement of minority students in our school system. We did this despite knowing that for at least several years, we'd be operating under "same services" only budgets that wouldn't have any funds in them for expanded research activities.

The mechanism that permitted this to be done was a decision made several years ago to focus most of the school system's discretionary resources on the issue of increasing minority student achievement in our schools, even if this meant that other improvements weren't made as quickly.

After this decision was made, as projects ended, we've been targeting much of the staff time that been freed up on different facets of minority achievement issue, even if this means that other important activities of the school system received much less attention from our office.

The result is that this year at least half of our research program is targeted directly on issues which directly affect minority student achievement; and now for the first time we're able to view many different parts of the elephant at the same time.

This coordinated approach is paying off. At present, the group of studies which we're either presently conducting or have recently concluded include the following:

- Studying referral and placement processes in our special education programs, with special attention given to the manner in which these processes are used with minority students.

- Developing new methods of setting goals for schools for the performance of minority students on standardized tests, with the emphasis on developing different standards for students who start at different points on the achievement continuum.
- Conducting a study funded by the National Science Foundation which identified early influences which later affected the decions of females and minority group members to enroll, or not enroll, in advanced math courses.
- Examining the impact of magnet programs on students and schools which participate in them; and on the sending schools that send them the bulk of their students.
- Doing a follow-up study on students who've dropped out of the school system over the past 2 years to determine what the students are now doing, their reasons for leaving, and -- of paramount concern -- what the students feel could have been done to prevent their leaving.
- Conducting a trio of complementing projects related to reducing the disparity between majority and minority suspensions:
  - A fieldtest of a microcomputer-based management information system DEA developed which is designed to reduce disciplinary incidents in a school by analyzing where in the building incidents are likely to occur at different times of day, and which staff members and pupils seem to be involved in a disproportionate number of incidents.
  - A study aimed at identifying early incidents in a student's career which seem to be associated with the student later being suspended several times.
  - A study that's comparing the climate in schools with high vs. low suspension rates of minority students, in order to determine whether the schools truly differ in climate, or whether they simply don't use the suspension option as often.

Naturally, not all these studies are providing us with equally useful information. Some are providing us with more insights than we ever hoped to get; a few look like duds now, but may just be late bloomers; and, for others, it's just too early to see what we'll get out of them.

However, this is where the strength of the systems approach comes in. For as we develop useful insights in one study, we're feeding them into others, both to validate what we think we've learned, and to focus the other studies more tightly. Thus when interviews in the study of students who've been suspended multiple times indicated that there may be some behavioral "tipping points" for junior high students that may signal that they're starting down a long downhill slide that will result in being suspended several times in high school, we were able to immediately explore that finding in dropout study by seeing whether the same be-

haviors are also associated with later decision to drop out of school. Not surprisingly, we found that the same predictors work forecast dropout decisions as well.

What we've learned from this experience is that if your resources are limited -- as all of ours are -- you're probably better off intensely focusing on a relatively limited range of related evaluation issues, rather than try to spread your money around so as to satisfy a wider range of constituent groups. After the present set of minority achievement studies are completed, I think that we'll try to resist the temptation (and pressure) to revisit the same issues almost immediately to see if things have improved. Rather, I'd like to negotiate with the school system another area of focus such as home influences on student achievement and attitudes, or exploiting technology in schools, and field a wide range of studies on one of those topics.